DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 662 CS 213 624

AUTHOR Scher, Amy
TITLE John Milton's Rainbow: Sonnet XIX.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (Pittsburgh, PA, March 27-29, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS English Instruction; *English Literature; *Figurative Language; Higher Education; *Literary Criticism; Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Milton (John)

ABSTRACT

John Milton presented a wide spectrum of materials and ideas illuminating the literary landscape like a rainbow which critics and authors have been discussing for centuries. One example of the multiple layers of meaning in Milton's poems is found in Sonnet XIX, which can be useful for both forensic discussion as well as for composition instruction. This sonnet, later called "On His Blindness," utilizes paradox to challenge the reader and expand the limits of discourse. In this poem, words like "light," "spent," "talent" and "account" can be interpreted on several levels and in multiple ways. Paradoxical tension can also be discerned in the distinct differences between the opening octave and the concluding sestet, as the nearly solipsistic beginning of the poem is transformed into the opposite end of the spectrum. Also, the last two lines in the poem unexpectedly stand out, but these lines underscore the other paradoxical aspects of the sonnet. Traditionally, the sonnet has been taught in terms of comparison and contrast with Sonnet VII. For classroom use, however, a historical-cultural overview is suggested, and the sonnet itself suggests discussion in conjunction with composition instruction. This might entail group work--role switching, for example. In short, Milton intentionally organized a concert of words with more than a double sense of meaning, qualities of paradoxical language well suited for the composition classroom. (Sixteen references are attached.) (HB)

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John Milton's Rainbow: Sonnet XIX

Amy Scher

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

RD 5 Box 871

Altoona, PA 16601

CS213624

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John Milton presented a philosophical spectrum of materials, consecutive bands of ideas illuminating the literary landscape like a rainbow which critics and authors have discussed for centuries. His works have been interpreted over and over utilizing every angle from Freudian dream imagery to Derridian deconstruction. Perhaps one reason why Milton's work is so rich is its multiple layers of meaning. The light of Milton presents a multi-hued arc reflecting his talent as a rainbow reflects the talent of its Creator. My paper concerns one muted color in Milton's rainbow of works, Sonnet XIX, which will be explored as a study in paradox, and I will suggest forensic discussion in conjunction with composition instruction.

Sonnet XIX, alternately titled "On His Blindness" by Isaac Newton in 1751, stands out as one of Milton's most famous sonnets (Hunter 27).

> When I consider how my light is spent,
> Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
> And that one Talent which is death to hide,
> Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
> To serve therewith my Maker, and present
> My true account, lest he returning chide;
> "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied,"
> I fondly ask; But patience to prevent
> That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
> Either man's works or his own gifts; who best
> Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his State
> Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
> And post O'er Land and Ocean without rest:
> They also serve who only stand and wait. (Milton 168)

Critics such as David Berkeley, Dixon Fiske, David Miller, and William Parker refer to Milton's blindness because of the word "light" in line one. Milton utilizes paradox throughout the sonnet to challenge his readers and to expand the limits of discourse. What does light mean? What is the meaning of spent?

Milton may be literally recording the loss of his eyesight at the time of the sonnet's composition. What becomes especially noticeable in the sonnet is the absence of imagery implying light. Light is defined as the agent by which vision becomes possible. However, light can also denote something spiritual emanating from the Heavens. The light in heaven which God creates is certainly different from candle light. Light can mean the illumination of the soul with divine truth or it can mean purity and holiness. Thus, light can be physical, spiritual, or both. Does the poet regret how he has abused his eyes or taken his vision for granted or does the word light stand for several things at once? Joel Wilcox posits that Milton's use of the word light derives from Homer's literal meaning of light as the sun, since the Pagan meaning was extended to signify "the arena in which one conducts the business of life" (77). Contrary to that interpretation, the reference to light spent can also allude to Christ's healing of the blind man (Fiske 38).

The word spent has several connotations as well; it means to expend, to employ, or to let loose, so that a paraphrase of the line might well read: how is my vision employed or expended? Additional nuances of the word mean to consume, to exhaust or to pass time, or the word can relate to money. Which interpretation does the reader choose?

Line two has spawned biographical controversy, yet it also raises further paradoxes. According to Lawrence Sasek, Milton the speaker states he has "more days of blindness ahead of him

than behind him" (17). The identical syntactical difficulty of the line allows an opposite interpretation. The phrase "Ere half my days" could mean either part of the poet's life, the days ahead or those behind in which he faces a sightless future. Does a life of blindness help define the meaning of the phrase "dark world" or does it simply allow for another bifurcation? In line one, the poet reflects on something which troubles him personally. Possibly, the speaker is Milton reflecting how he spends his days in blindness. The interchange of the word light with the word "life" allows readers the liberty of that speculation while the paradoxical nature of the sonnet permits readers to accept multiple interpretations conjointly.

The sonnet also entertains a simultaneous blending of the religious with the poetic as critics such as Christopher Hill, Gary Stringer, William McCarthy, and Anna Nardo suggest. The word Talent in line three is one example. It is also a word given to multiple definitions. For modern readers, the word talent indicates a natural gift, an aptitude, technique, or the demonstration of one's skill.

In Milton's day, the word talent had the connotation of calculating money (Hunter 27). However, Milton's association with the Parable of the Talents imparts incongruity into the line. John Crossan posits two thematic sources for The Parable of the Talents, Matthew 25: 14-30 and Luke 19: 12-27 (100). Traditionally, the Parables enforce the need for keeping the heart diligent. While they differ slightly, the Matthew and Luke

parables share one common belief--faith works.

For Milton, the Talent was his writing; therefore, if he failed to invest what God had given him, spiritual death resulted. Readers learn in line three, that it is death to hide or bury a creative gift which the Holy Spirit has given. The spirituality continues in the phrase, "though my Soul more bent," where the flesh contradicts the spirit. What is the Soul inclined to do which the human mind rebels against? Critics postulate these lines show Milton's despondency. However, one could equally assert that "more bent" means the poet's desire to serve God is greater because the poet's affliction becomes a sign of his salvation.

Line six offers additional multi-layers of interpretation, with the many facets of the word "account." Account can center on one's creative work, or it can stand for the poet's true feelings about his "Maker" in the preceding line. Jerome Mazarro posits: "in a classic metaphor of the period, the jottings become account books where the debt of man's sin is balanced by God's grace..." (4). Line seven also teases the reader with its paradoxical expression. If "light" represents God, would God demand "day-labor?" Day-labor can also relate to The Parable of the Vineyard Workers illustrating pure faith (Shafer). Indeed, the poet falls into the trap of feeling his own frustration along with a suggested power. While the final "I" in the sonnet appears in line eight, the octave orchestrates a justification of works while the sestet harmonizes the virtue of pure faith.

Milton did not break the sonnet into the traditional octave and sestet. While critics call attention to the "tangled syntax and nervous meter" of the octave which shows the "poet's despair" (Stoehr 293), they neglect the fact that the sonnet octave and sestet show a distinct paradox. In the octave, there are nine references to "I, me, or my" while there are no references in the sestet. Instead, the sestet changes the nature of the poem from the deeply personal meditation of one human to the universal everyone, evidenced by the pronoun "they." The nearly solipsistic beginning of the sonnet ends on the opposite end of the spectrum. The paired opposites of action and waiting, of light and dark, and of the personal and the universal clearly express the paradoxical tension between the octave and the sestet.

As critics suggest, the last two lines in the poem unexpectedly stand out. Also, critics contend that the sonnet is "governed by the idea of waiting patiently for the Lord" thus, it builds to a climax, but they neglect to mention how or why. One can act for one's salvation by simply waiting for the Lord. Stoehr finds that the "final syntactic couplet bears all the emotional weight that has been accumulating, and the shock of resurrection into day and blindness is further intensified by the very structure of the last line" (295). While it is true that the couplet differs in syntax from the remainder of the sonnet, the resolution at the end of the poem seems paradoxical as well--doing by simply waiting.

Traditionally, the sonnet has been used as a means for teaching the concept of comparison contrast to Sonnet VII, for example. For classroom use, an historical-cultural overview of the period is suggested, while the sonnet itself suggests discussion in conjunction with composition instruction. For example, students may be grouped into those who participate in two groups of opposing discourses with a third group monitoring, and ultimately reporting the outcome which then would lead to a writing assignment. Role switching, another suggested activity, encompasses the skills of audience awareness, collaboration, and metacognitive perception. Examining the sonnet as paradoxical in nearly every line invites speculation facilitating the role of oral communication in developmental curricula.

Milton intentionally organizes a concert of words with more than a double sense of meaning. He stretches the language, thereby enticing the reader to imagine some concepts and ideas which cannot be seen with the eyes or expressed adequately in words. He harmonizes the public with the private, the outward appearance with the inward vision, and the physical with the spiritual. In essence as well as composition, Milton achieved a rainbow of paradox and continued to produce vivid literary rainbows imbued with a spiritual Light long after the light of the sun receded from his vision.

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